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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001763

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SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT WORKING OUT DETAILS OF ARF
DISASTER RELIEF EXERCISE

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting with U.S. officials in Manila July 17, Philippine officials confirmed their commitment to co-host with the United States an ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Disaster Relief Exercise in Manila during 2009, but said they have many hurdles to overcome internally before a date is set for the event. While Ministry of Foreign Affairs Assistant Secretary for American Affairs Lourdes Yparraguirre said "we are not out of the woods yet" in terms of getting a Philippine interagency group established to work on details of the exercise, she said Philippine officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of National Defense, and Armed Forces of the Philippines had come to agreement on some basic tenets of the exercise. Key to acceptance by Philippine officials was the acknowledgment by the USG that the exercise would be -- and be seen as -- civilian-led, with participating military forces from ARF nations playing a supporting role. During the meeting, U.S. planners pushed the Philippine government to work toward making an announcement of the exercise dates by the August 18-21 Mutual Defense Board/Security Engagement Board meeting in Hawaii, at which senior U.S. and Philippine government officials will be present. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) During a meeting with U.S. officials in Manila July 17, a Philippine interagency group affirmed the Philippine government's desire to co-host a disaster relief exercise involving ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) nations with the United States next year. The Philippine government first agreed in principle to the concept in March 2007, but it was not until President Arroyo visited Washington in June that the USG received a firm commitment that the exercise would be held in the Philippines, sometime in 2009. USG attendees at the meeting thanked the Philippine officials for their hard work, acknowledging the many equities that had to be satisfied for all parties to make the exercise a success. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Assistant Secretary for American Affairs Lourdes Yparraguirre stressed that the Philippine side was "not out of the woods yet" with regard to Philippine interagency coordination, but that key agencies in the Philippine government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of National Defense, Armed Forces of the Philippines) already were discussing the disaster relief response in greater detail.

¶3. (C) USG officials at the meeting highlighted the Balikatan exercise in April 2009 as the preferred venue on which to append the ARF exercise. In previous Balikatan planning events, AFP officials had raised concerns with the Embassy that the ARF exercise would supplant Balikatan, an issue that was quickly voiced by the Philippine delegation at the meeting. USG officials assured the Philippine interagency group that while Balikatan would retain its combat training focus, conducting the ARF exercise at the end of Balikatan was a priority for the U.S., because of the availability of military assets that already would be in

place. Philippine officials said they would take this point under consideration as they evaluated possible dates for the exercise. U.S. officials stressed the need for a quick decision on the event dates, and Philippine officials said they hoped to have an answer by the August 18-21 Mutual Defense Board/Security Engagement Board in Hawaii.

¶4. (C) Both sides notionally concurred that the scope of this groundbreaking event would need to be such that all parties involved could feel they participated in a meaningful event with tangible results. At the same time, U.S. and Philippine officials agreed that the number of participants would need to be limited, given the abbreviated planning horizon for an event in 2009. Initial discussions centered on a disaster relief scenario of no more than a week, with approximately 200-300 multinational participants. The event would simulate a real disaster (typhoon, earthquake, volcanic eruption, etc.) common to Southeast Asia and probably take place outside of Luzon, where the bulk of Balikatan events would be held. The Visayas region of the central Philippines, which is in the path of frequent typhoons, is an area under consideration. Both sides agreed that geographically separating the event from Balikatan, to the extent possible, would help to distinguish the event as humanitarian -- rather than military -- in nature.

¶5. (C) A key point that Philippine officials brought up throughout the meeting was their strong preference for the ARF exercise to be civilian-led, with participating military forces from ARF nations playing a supporting role, rather than being involved in face-to-face delivery of relief services. Although the Philippine Department of National

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Defense has overall responsibility for disaster relief in the country, the subordinate civilian-chaired National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC) would be the lead Philippine agency for the ARF exercise, with logistical support and manpower supplied by the Armed Forces of the Philippines. The NDCC includes the Red Cross, Department of Social Welfare, Department of Health, and the military, among others. U.S. officials said that while one of the key reasons for conducting the ARF exercise was to display the group's ability to conduct major multinational relief exercises, we were in agreement that the civilian leadership should be out front.

¶6. (C) Discussing the ARF exercise in relation to the July 24 ARF Ministerial in Singapore, Philippine officials presented a draft "Rules of Participation" to USG officials that emphasized several points, including that all participation would be self-funded by ARF nations, that participants from countries that do not have a Status of Forces Agreement with the Philippines would be under Philippine jurisdiction and have to obtain appropriate visas, and that military personnel would provide operational support under civilian leadership. USG officials concurred with the Philippine proposal to circulate the draft "Rules of Participation" on the margins of the ARF Ministerial and solicit comment from member nations. Philippine officials also proposed attaching a draft joint U.S.-Philippine statement announcing the exercise as an appendix to the ARF proceedings, to which USG officials acceded. In a sign that the Philippines will use the ministerial to socialize the ARF exercise, prior to departing for Singapore, Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo announced on July 20 that the Philippines would be the site for a "disaster relief drill" between ARF nations in 2009. Details of the "drill" -- scenario, location, date, and participants -- are still being planned, Romulo said, but that the exercise "might be held around May." Romulo added, "That's being worked out because the purpose is for each neighbor to help each other, so for it to be effective, the more countries pooling resources, the better."

COMMENT

17. (C) It has been difficult for the Philippine government to get to this point, and their delegation was visibly uncomfortable during the meeting when it came to discussing specifics about the ARF exercise. The "Rules of Participation" document seemed to reflect some consensus on the Philippine side for certain issues, but it is clear that the key decisionmakers in the Department of National Defense and Armed Forces of the Philippines will have to be more involved before a date is set for the exercise. The Embassy will continue to push our Philippine interlocutors to make a decision before the August 18-21 meeting in Hawaii, but U.S. and participating ARF nations officials should be prepared for a shortened planning timeline, as announcement may not take place at that time. We have emphasized the need to begin involving ARF partners as soon as possible, particularly with regard to funding and asset allocation, and have pushed Philippine officials as far as appropriate on key issues to this point. Nevertheless, USG planners have to be prepared for the protracted Philippine decision cycle and to respond quickly once the exercise planning commences in earnest. As an example, when queried about the their government's decision to allow foreign military participation in the ARF exercise -- a major point of contention due to Philippine Constitutional restrictions -- Philippine officials confided to the U.S. delegation that their interagency had not come into agreement on the issue until the night before President Arroyo raised the ARF disaster relief exercise with Secretary Gates in Washington. END COMMENT.

KENNEY